

The Lower Connecticut River Important Bird Area

The New Hampshire and Vermont Important Bird Area Programs are part of a national and international effort to identify areas that provide critical habitat to birds during some stage of their annual cycle. In New Hampshire the program is a partnership of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. In Vermont it is coordinated by Audubon Vermont, a state office of the National Audubon Society. IBAs are identified based on strict scientific criteria, including 1) the presence of threatened or endangered species, 2) other species and habitats of conservation concern, and 3) areas where birds congregate during breeding, migration, or winter. It is hoped that recognition of IBAs can help guide future conservation and research efforts at areas that meet these criteria.

The Lower Connecticut River meets categories 1-3 of the IBA criteria, as follows:

1) Endangered and threatened species

Two pairs of Bald Eagles nest within this IBA, including the only known nest in Vermont near Herrick's Cove. In addition, between 4 and 10 eagles frequent this stretch of river during the winter.

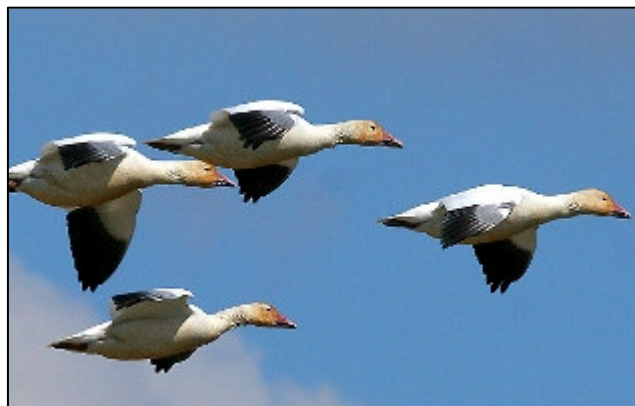
2) Other habitats and species of conservation concern

Extensive wetlands associated with the Vernon and Bellows Falls dams provide habitat to several species of locally uncommon marshbirds, including Pied-billed Grebe, Least and American Bitterns, Virginia Rail, Sora, Common Moorhen, and Marsh Wren. Remnant floodplain forest associated with the river hosts birds such as Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, all near the northern limits of their ranges in New England. Grasslands – primarily agricultural areas – provide important feeding habitat to migrating waterfowl and other species.



3) Congregatory species

By far the most noticeable birds that use the Lower Connecticut River are waterfowl. Between October and April hundreds or thousands of ducks and geese of up to 30 species use the area, with the highest numbers generally reported in the spring. The Connecticut River may be the primary migration corridor for Snow Geese in New Hampshire, while other common species include Canada Goose, American Black Duck, Mallard, and Ring-necked Duck. Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers are common wintering birds on the open stretches of the river, and may congregate in large flocks during migration in the impoundment above Vernon Dam.



Other congregatory species that use the river's varied habitats include shorebirds, herons, and passerines. While the numbers of shorebirds using the Connecticut Valley are small relative to Lake Champlain or the New Hampshire seacoast, these species do stop in when water levels are relatively low. Similarly, Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets gather in the marshes in late summer. During fall and winter, old agricultural fields provide food to flocks of Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, and other seed-eaters.

For the purposes of the IBA Program, the Lower Connecticut River IBA extends from the Massachusetts Border to the area around Charlestown (NH) and Springfield (VT). It is largely restricted to the river and its floodplain, as partially delineated by topographic features such as the lower terrace formed by glacial Lake Hitchcock. Issues facing the IBA include changes in land use (agricultural conversion, development), pollution, invasive plants, and changes in hydrology associated with the two dams.

For more information on the New Hampshire Important Bird Area Program, contact:

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More details on the IBA Program are also available on the N.H. Audubon web site.

